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Oil Train Derailment Highlights Need for Safety Reforms



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Staff infoZine

Fayette County, WV - infoZine - An oil train transporting highly volatile crude oil derailed and caught fire Monday in Fayette County, W.V., spewing burning oil into the Kanawha River and setting a house ablaze, forcing the evacuation of two nearby communities and threatening municipal drinking water supplies.

The accident, which follows a similar derailment and explosion in Timmins, Ontario on Saturday, is the latest in a string of fiery accidents involving oil trains in Canada and the United States in recent years following a 40-fold increase in crude oil transport by rail since 2008 that has been marked by no upgrade in federal safety requirements.

“Back-to-back fiery derailments involving crude oil trains should be an unmistakable wake-up call to our political leaders: Stop these dangerous oil trains and stop them now,” said Mollie Matteson, a senior scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “People’s lives are at stake, clean drinking water is at stake, and the well-being of towns and wildlife along thousands of miles of rail line are directly in harm’s way of this unchecked, reckless increase in oil transport by rail.”

Oil transport, especially by rail, has dramatically increased in recent years, growing from virtually nothing in 2008 to more than 400,000 rail cars of oil in 2013. Billions of gallons of oil pass through towns and cities ill-equipped to respond to the kinds of explosions and spills that have been occurring. A series of fiery oil-train derailments in the United States and Canada has resulted in life-threatening explosions and millions of gallons of crude oil being spilled into waterways.

The worst was a derailment in Quebec in July 2013 that killed 47 people, forced the evacuation of 2,000 people, and incinerated portions of a popular tourist town. Last year, an explosive derailment occurred in April in downtown Lynchburg, Va., resulted in crude oil leaking out of punctured tank cars, setting the James River on fire.

Ethanol shipments by rail have also raised safety concerns. On Feb. 4, a train transporting ethanol derailed along the Mississippi River in Iowa, catching fire and sending an unknown amount of ethanol into the river.

Last week the U.S. Department of Transportation sent new rules governing oil train safety to the White House for review, prior to public release. It will be another three months before the rules are published, and at least another

two and a half years before the most dangerous tank cars are phased out of use for the most hazardous cargos. The oil and railroad industries have lobbied for weaker rules on tank car safety and brake requirements. The industries also want more time to comply with the new rules.

Without regulations that will effectively prevent derailments and rupture of tank cars, oil trains will continue to threaten people, drinking water supplies and wildlife, including endangered species.

“Waiting another two, three or five years for marginal improvements in oil train safety is not acceptable when these bomb trains keep derailling and setting towns and rivers on fire,” said Matteson. “Before more people die and more waterways are destroyed, it’s time for our political leaders to put the brakes on oil-by-rail transport.”

In addition to the threat to local communities, the Kanawha River is home to a half-dozen federally protected mussel species, among other rare and vulnerable aquatic species that inhabit the biologically important river.

The Center for Biological Diversity has petitioned for oil trains that include far fewer tank cars and for comprehensive oil spill response plans for railroads as well as other important federal reforms, and is also pushing to stop the expansion of projects that will facilitate further increases in crude by rail.